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How the Romney Campaign Blew it

Abstract: Political scientists have generally been skeptical that presidential campaigns have a significant effect on the final outcome of a presidential election. But 2012, this article argues, was an exception. By all the indicators that political scientists traditionally look to, 2012 had long shaped up to be a very close election. That Mitt Romney lost was due largely to the remarkably inept quality of his campaign, which largely avoided any serious discussion of the issues, even when such discussion would have worked to his advantage.

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Introduction

Though the relationship between academic election scholars and political journalists is more amicable and cooperative than is sometimes recognized, one traditional difference between the two tribes is their perspective on presidential campaigns. To read most campaign journalism is to get the sense (implicit, if not explicit) that everything hinges on what takes place between Labor Day and early November. Whichever side emerges triumphant, one can count on a stream of articles attributing the victory to the superiority of their campaign. By contrast, academic analysts have long been skeptical that presidential campaigns count for very much.

In what is generally regarded as the first great empirical study of presidential elections, Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet (1948) concluded that the 1940 campaign had surprisingly little effect on most voters and changed remarkably few votes. The American National Election Studies, a series of academic election surveys that have been conducted in conjunction with every presidential election since 1952, have generally found that only about a third of all voters report reaching their decisions during the fall campaign (for details, see Campbell 2008). Most voters decide before the formal campaign even begins.

The point of this article, however, is to argue that 2012 was different. All of the indicators to which academic election scholars have learned to pay attention suggested that 2012 was going to be a close election. That Romney lost and Obama won can thus be attributed, in my view, largely to

the quality of the campaigns they waged. In particular, I will contend that Romney ran a campaign notable for its ineptness and political insensitivity. Had the Romney campaign not made so many errors, a different party would probably be in control of the presidency for the next 4 years.

The Lay of the Land: 2012

In recent years, political scientists have devoted a good deal of effort to explaining the outcomes of presidential elections: why the vote turns out the way it does, in the aggregate. Some (though not all) of this work has been conducted under the rubric of election forecasting, but even if one is skeptical of the ability of such models to predict the results of an election before it takes place, these models have, I believe, taught us much about the general determinants of past election outcomes. More specifically, this research has called attention to three major factors or indicators that, taken together, defined the context against which the 2012 presidential election took place.

Presidential Approval Ratings

Presidential elections, in the most fundamental sense, are a referendum on the performance of the incumbent president. Presidents who are thought to have handled their duties effectively are usually re-elected; those who are seen as deficient are unlikely to be returned to office. The best single measure of a president's standing with the American public is the presidential approval question. Originally developed by the Gallup Poll and asked on a regular basis since the late 1940s, the question reads, "Do you approve or disapprove of the way [the incumbent president] is handling his job as president?"

When measured in June of the election year,¹ the president's approval rating – the percentage who approve of the way the president is handling his job – is a very accurate predictor of which party will win the upcoming presidential election. As the data in Table 1 indicate, when the incumbent president's approval rating was 45% or lower, his party's candidate lost six

¹ I use the June results because in a fair number of early election years, Gallup did not ask the presidential approval question between June and November.

Table 1 Early summer presidential approval ratings as a predictor of presidential election outcomes.

President (year)	Approval rate in June of the election year	Percentage of the two-party popular vote received by the president's party	Did president's party win?
Lyndon Johnson (1964)	74	61.3	Yes
Dwight Eisenhower (1956)	72	57.8	Yes
Dwight Eisenhower (1960)	59	49.9	No
Richard Nixon (1972)	58	61.8	Yes
Bill Clinton (2000)	58	50.3	No
Bill Clinton (1996)	55	54.7	Yes
Ronald Reagan (1984)	54	59.2	Yes
Ronald Reagan (1988)	50	53.9	Yes
George W. Bush (2004)	48	51.2	Yes
Gerald Ford (1976)	45	48.9	No
Lyndon Johnson (1968)	41	49.6	No
George H.W. Bush (1992)	37	46.5	No
Jimmy Carter (1980)	34	44.7	No
Harry Truman (1952)	30	44.6	No
George W. Bush (2008)	29	46.3	No

Source: Approval ratings are taken from the Gallup Poll.

of six elections. By contrast, when the president had an approval rating of 48% or higher, his party won seven of nine contests. (The two exceptions were both sitting vice presidents who tried to succeed a highly popular president and found that his popularity did not transfer to them.)

Where did Barack Obama stand on this measure? In Gallup Polls conducted during June of 2012, Obama had an average approval rating of 46%, somewhere in the uncharted territory that separates likely winners from likely losers. By this measure, in other words, the 2012 election always looked to be close. In the lead-up to the 2012 voting, conservative commentators often compared Obama to Jimmy Carter, widely regarded as a failed president, who was decisively defeated by Ronald Reagan when he sought re-election in 1980. But as these data show, there was a major difference between Obama's approval rating in 2012 and Carter's in 1980: Obama's rating was 12% points higher than Carter's.

The State of the Economy

Of all the many issues a president deals with, both common sense and a good deal of research indicate that the economy is of special importance. A president who presides over a poor economy is, of course, likely to have a low approval rating, but economic performance seems to have a separate, independent impact on election results. The state of the economy can be measured in a variety of ways. The unemployment and inflation rates and real

change in gross domestic product and disposable income have all been used; such indicators can also be measured over varying periods of time.

Nevertheless, I know of no plausible measure which could justify any other conclusion than that the economy had done poorly during the Obama presidency – well below the level that presidents must normally achieve in order to get re-elected. Consider several ways of crunching the numbers:

- Political economist Douglas Hibbs has long argued that the growth of real per capita disposable income is the best single measure of the electorate's economic well-being, and that its effect on the vote is best captured by a weighted average of the quarterly results throughout a president's term. On average, this income index has grown by 1.8% during all presidential terms since 1952. At least up through the second quarter of 2012, Obama's weighted-average growth rate was 0.1%, the second worst of the 16 elections Hibbs examined (see Hibbs 2012).
- Campbell (2013) uses real growth in gross domestic product as his economic measure, and has recently calculated average growth rates for every president since 1952 who was running for re-election. He also excludes results from the first year in a president's term, on the quite reasonable grounds that first-year economic results are primarily due to the conditions that a president inherits from his predecessor. By this measure, Obama is the eighth worst of the ten presidents Campbell studied. The two presidents who

did worse – George H.W. Bush from 1990 to 1992 and Gerald Ford from 1974 to 1976 – both lost.

- Since some analysts believe that voters assess a president's economic performance over a very short time-horizon, Campbell (2013) also calculated a second measure that looks just at the real growth of gross domestic product during the second quarter of the election year. In this case, Obama is the ninth worst of ten presidents, running ahead of only Jimmy Carter in 1980.

If past economic performance were all that mattered, Obama would now be preparing to leave the White House.

Time for a Change

Some years ago, Emory political scientist Alan Abramowitz (1988) called attention to an important and (to that point) unnoticed political regularity: The longer a party has been in the White House, the more difficult it is to win the next presidential election. In particular, there seems to be a big difference between the strategic situation that confronts a party that has only been in the White House for the last 4 years (i.e., the situation of Bill Clinton in 1996 or George W. Bush in 2004), and the situation a party faces when it has held the presidency for 8 or more years consecutively.

As shown in Table 2, since 1900 there have been 11 presidential elections in which the party of the incumbent president had only been in possession of the White House for 4 years. In 10 of those 11 cases (91%), the incumbent party won the election. By comparison, there have been 17 elections in which the incumbent party had held the presidency for at least the last 8 years. In this type of election, the incumbent party was only victorious seven times (41%) – and six of those seven victories took place before 1952.

The practical implication of these results can be simply stated: It is enormously difficult to defeat

an incumbent president under the circumstances in which Barack Obama found himself in 2012. Indeed, the Obama campaign is a vivid illustration of at least some of the reasons why incumbent presidents whose party has been in power for just 4 years are so likely to win re-election. Faced with an economy that by all objectives measures was not performing well, Obama was able to tell the voters, “I inherited a mess from my predecessor. My policies have not had enough time to work. Give me 4 more years.” If a Democrat is still forced to say such things in 2016, they will sound hollow and implausible, if not pathetic. In 2012, as I will show later in this article, many Americans clearly accepted these claims.

When these three factors are taken into account, the clear conclusion was that the 2012 election was likely to be very close. The first factor indicated a dead heat, the second factor pointed to an Obama loss, the third suggested he would be re-elected. Assuming the second factor largely neutralized the third, a close election was a good pre-election bet. This was also the general conclusion of the election forecasting models. According to data compiled by Campbell (2012), who occupies a position in election forecasting approximately equivalent to the role that Pete Rozelle played with respect to the National Football League, 13 models offered predictions of the Obama-Romney contest at least 57 days before the election. Eight predicted an Obama victory, five said Romney would win. Averaging across all 13 predictions, Obama was expected to win 50.2% of the two-party popular vote (with, of course, a huge margin of error).

Yet one group that apparently never got the message was the Romney campaign. According to numerous media reports, the Romney campaign spent most of the fall firmly convinced that they were comfortably on their way to victory. No matter that most national polls showed nothing of the sort, or that state polls showed, if anything, an even tougher road to an Electoral College majority. The Romney campaign seems, by all indications, to have coasted through the fall campaign with a smug, unshakable feeling of confidence.

The problem with this misperception was not just that it led the Romney campaign to be bitterly disappointed on election night. More importantly, as we will see throughout this article, it led the Romney campaign to adopt a general strategic outlook more suited to a candidate who was an all-but-prohibitive favorite, as if their most important task were not to mount an aggressive effort to convince undecided or weakly committed voters, but to avoid squandering a big lead.

Table 2 How long a party has been in the White House affects how likely they are to win the upcoming election.

	Incumbent party has been in the White House for just 4 years	Incumbent party has been in the White House for 8 or more years
Incumbent party wins	10	7
Incumbent party loses	1	10

The Legacy of George W. Bush

There was one other factor that constituted an important part of the background conditions for the 2012 election – a factor that was not explicitly included in any of the forecasting models, but that nevertheless played, I believe, an important role in determining the final outcome. This was the sizable shadow cast by the presidency of George W. Bush. Bush was not just an unpopular president. He was, by the time he left office, hugely unpopular. Indeed, as the data in Table 1 indicate, he was, as of his final summer in the White House, more unpopular than any similarly-situated president in the history of polling.

George H.W. Bush had not been especially popular in the summer of 1992, which is why, 6 months later, he was decisively beaten by Bill Clinton. But the elder Bush’s failures were widely seen as selective: he had no apparent idea what to do about a stagnant economy, but received very high marks for his handling of foreign policy. Most Americans also believed that he had conducted himself with dignity – and without major scandal. By contrast, there were, by late 2008, few major policy issues that George W. Bush had not made a mess of.

The economy had tanked; the budget was way out of balance; the situation in Iraq had recently taken a turn for the better, but only after it had become clear that the postwar occupation had been dramatically mishandled;

No Child Left Behind, the president’s signature piece of domestic legislation, was widely criticized for being poorly designed. The president’s own marks for honesty and integrity were also quite low, primarily due to the perception that he had misled the public about the existence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq in order to win support for the war against Saddam Hussein.

I know a number of Republicans, and have read a number of Republican bloggers and commentators, who are convinced that, after watching Obama in office, many Americans have come to have a considerably more positive view of George W. Bush’s presidency. The available survey data, however, provide only the thinnest support for this claim. Consider, for example, the results in Table 3. On two occasions over the last 4 years, the Gallup Poll has asked its respondents how each of the last eight presidents (including Obama) “will go down in history.” In January of 2009, George W. Bush was ranked at the very bottom, with 59% of Americans saying that he was either “below average” or “poor.”

By February of 2012, Bush had moved up just one notch – ahead of Richard Nixon, but still behind Carter, Obama, and all the others. The same pattern emerges in questions that ask survey respondents whether their general opinion of the former president is favorable or unfavorable. A Pew Research Center poll conducted in January of 2009 found that 60% of the public viewed Bush

Table 3 Public assessments of how recent presidents will go down in history.

	Outstanding	Above average	Average	Below average	Poor	Don’t know	Overall assessment
Jan. 9–11, 2009							
Ronald Reagan	25	39	26	4	5	2	3.76
Barack Obama	24	38	25	5	6	3	3.70
Bill Clinton	13	37	29	10	10	0	3.33
Gerald Ford	4	19	58	7	4	8	3.13
George H.W. Bush	5	23	49	10	11	2	3.01
Jimmy Carter	6	20	39	15	14	5	2.88
Richard Nixon	2	13	32	23	25	4	2.41
George W. Bush	4	13	23	23	36	0	2.25
Feb. 2–5, 2012							
Ronald Reagan	27	42	20	6	4	1	3.83
Bill Clinton	18	42	28	7	5	0	3.61
George H.W. Bush	6	29	44	11	9	1	3.12
Gerald Ford	5	16	54	15	4	6	3.03
Barack Obama	10	28	26	17	18	1	2.95
Jimmy Carter	5	20	34	22	16	3	2.75
George W. Bush	7	18	28	22	25	0	2.60
Richard Nixon	3	11	28	32	23	3	2.37

Note: Question wording was: “How do you think each of the following presidents will go down in history – as an outstanding president, above average, average, below average, or poor?”

“Overall assessment” figures were computed by assigning a value of 5 for “outstanding” responses, 4 for “above average,” 3 for “average,” 2 for “below average,” and 1 for “poor,” and then calculating a mean value for each president.

Source: The Gallup Poll.

unfavorably as against 37% who had a favorable opinion. By September of 2012, the same question produced results that were only slightly more positive: 41% favorable, 53% unfavorable. In every question from 2012 that I have examined, a plurality of Americans continued to have negative feelings toward Bush.²

Bush's continuing unpopularity had two important implications for the 2012 election. First, it provided Obama with a ready excuse for the economy's weak performance throughout his first term. Faced with an unemployment rate that stayed above 8% until the final months before the November election, Obama could (and did) say that he had inherited an unprecedented economic catastrophe from his predecessor and that his policies had, in fact, done a creditable job under the circumstances.

In purely economic terms, there are lots of reasons to be skeptical of this argument. The more important point, for the moment, is that the American public largely accepted it. The 2012 National Election Pool exit poll included a question asking voters who was "more to blame for current economic problems," Obama or Bush. Just 38% of 2012 voters blamed the incumbent president; 53% felt Bush was more at fault.

This result was not unusual, nor was it just a function of Obama voters' seeking to rationalize their vote choice. To the contrary, almost exactly the same result had shown up in poll after poll throughout the election year. On four occasions between January and October, 2012, the ABC News/*Washington Post* poll asked its samples who they thought was "more responsible for the country's current economic problems – Barack Obama or George W. Bush?" The average result (there was little variation across surveys) was 33% Obama, 52% Bush.

In two Quinnipiac University Polls, conducted in February and September, 50%, on average, said that Bush was more to blame "for the current condition of the US economy," versus 38% who blamed Obama. According to the Roper Center's comprehensive collection of contemporary American survey questions, every question of this type, in which survey respondents were asked whether Obama or Bush was the chief culprit in the economy's misfiring, found a plurality of the public answering "Bush."

Second, and equally ominous for the Romney campaign, lots of Americans were also well disposed to accept another major argument frequently made by Obama and

his supporters: that Romney, as a Republican, was just a George W. Bush retread; that Romney's policies would closely resemble those that most Americans blamed for, as Obama often put it, "getting us into this mess in the first place." A Bloomberg Poll in September of 2012 found that 45% of the public thought that Romney's "economic policies would . . . be a revival of those of former president George W. Bush"; only 37% said Romney "would not" mimic Bush's policies.

These results should have carried two clear lessons for the Romney campaign. First, it was not enough just to recite a litany of statistics showing that the US macroeconomy had been performing poorly. Indeed, the Obama campaign often conceded this point. (On one well-known occasion, Vice President Joseph Biden had declared that "the middle class [has] been buried the last 4 years.") Romney also needed to convince voters that Obama was in some significant measure at fault. This was, to be sure, the kind of complicated argument that is not easy to make in a media environment dominated by short sound-bites and shorter attention spans. Obama also had the advantage of having made the opposite argument, without refutation, for a considerable period of time before the general election campaign began.

Still, the task was not hopeless. Romney might, for example, have compared how Ronald Reagan had dealt with an even worse economic mess that he inherited from Jimmy Carter – and produced a far more vigorous recovery. Or he might have taunted Obama during the debates by asking him how long he intended to keep blaming his problems on George W. Bush.

The Romney campaign, however, never seriously took up the challenge. Though Romney occasionally said that Obama had inherited a difficult economic situation and made it worse (more during the primaries than during the general election campaign), there was no sustained attempt to make this case: not at the Republican convention, not during the debates, not in a major ad campaign. Instead, Romney, Ryan, and their ads and surrogates were content to criticize the current state of the economy, with no apparent recognition that this alone was probably not a winning message.

The second strategic lesson was that Romney desperately needed to put some measure of distance between himself and George W. Bush. Had he been inclined to do it, this would have been a far simpler undertaking. Shortly after clinching the Republican nomination, Romney could have given a major policy address in which he acknowledged what most Americans already knew – that Bush had made numerous mistakes as president – and then detailed five or seven specific ways in which he would

² These questions, it should be added, probably overestimate Bush's standing with the American public, since they measure personal favorability rather than job performance. Through Bush's final years in office, his favorability ratings were always higher than his approval ratings. That is to say, many Americans considered Bush "a nice guy" but an incompetent president.

have been different.³ He might even have borrowed a page from Bill Clinton's 1992 playbook and insisted that he was, as compared to Bush, "a different kind of Republican." Several conservative commentators, moreover, had written columns pointing out the need to make such a speech [see, in particular, a very good article that Jonah Goldberg wrote for *National Review* in early August (2012)].

Yet here, too, the Romney campaign ignored an important aspect of the reality that confronted them. So far as I am aware, the only time Romney specifically addressed this issue was in the second presidential debate, when it was the subject of a question from one of the "town-hall" audience members. Romney's answer that night was good, though not great – but one 2-minute answer, even one broadcast on national television, hardly suffices to overcome months of propaganda from the other side.

An Issue-Averse Campaign

The Romney campaign's failure to come to terms with the Bush legacy is just one symptom of a more general problem: From the moment Romney clinched the Republican nomination in late May, his campaign was reluctant to engage in any serious, detailed, sustained discussion of the issues. This strange unwillingness was especially conspicuous in the Romney campaign's presentation of the candidate's own policy preferences. On issue after issue, Romney gave an account of what he intended to do that was maddeningly short on specifics. He said he would reduce both individual and corporate income tax rates by eliminating various loopholes and deductions – but said almost nothing about which specific deductions he planned to cut. He promised to reduce federal domestic spending, but with a few notable exceptions such as public television, said very little about which programs would get the axe. He said he would "repeal and replace" Obamacare, but it was never clear just what he wanted to replace it with.

Of course, no presidential campaign provides a full, exhaustive description of what it plans to do and when, complete with draft legislation and a detailed breakdown of its first budget. But voters and reporters have learned

to expect something more than a statement of goals that is not accompanied by a reasonably clear discussion of how those goals are to be achieved. Yet that is, in general, exactly what the Romney campaign offered the electorate in 2012. When challenged on its lack of specific policy details, as it frequently was during the presidential and vice presidential debates, the Romney campaign claimed that providing details would only make it more difficult to negotiate a final bill that would be acceptable to Congress. As Romney himself put it in the first debate:

My experience as a governor is if I come in and lay down a piece of legislation and say, "It's my way or the highway," I don't get a lot done. What I do is the same way that Tip O'Neill and Ronald Reagan worked together some years ago. When Ronald Reagan ran for office, he laid out the principles that he was going to foster. He said he was going to lower tax rates. He said he was going to broaden the base. . . . Those are my principles. . . . And I'm going to work together with Congress to say, OK, what are the various ways we could bring down deductions, for instance?

Not to mince words, but this justification for Romney's evasiveness was ridiculous and, I suspect, wholly unconvincing to most voters.⁴ On issues that are important to the president, the contemporary legislative process generally does not *begin* until the president produces a draft bill or budget. (When Dwight Eisenhower initially declined to do this, a senior administration witness was curtly told by the chairman of a House committee, "Don't expect us to start from scratch on what you people want. That's not the way we do things here – *you* draft the bills and *we* work them over.")⁵ Unless the president specifically says otherwise (and sometimes even if he does), no one regards the president's initial expression of preferences as written in stone, completely beyond negotiation or compromise. It is just the starting point.

Romney was, of course, not the first presidential candidate to hide his policy plans behind a wall of evasion and double-talk (though few recent candidates have pursued this practice as thoroughly and artlessly as he did). As political analysts and practitioners have long recognized, candidates are sometimes deliberately ambiguous because they believe that providing specifics will hurt their chances of winning the upcoming election. But as

³ He might, for example, have said that Bush increased domestic spending, while he would cut it; or that Bush had enacted several major tax cuts that the nation could not afford, while his tax reforms would be revenue neutral. If Romney had been of a mind to be honest, he could also have promised that if he were required to send US troops into a combat situation, he would plan the postwar occupation far better than Bush had in Iraq.

⁴ It is also a largely inaccurate description of how Ronald Reagan operated. While it is true that Reagan provided few specifics about his tax reform plan during his 1984 re-election campaign, he had, in 1980 when he was not an incumbent, offered a quite specific list of the major items in his tax-cut plan – and, once elected, he tried his best to get that plan enacted into law, though he did accept some changes and compromises.

⁵ As quoted in Neustadt (1955), p. 1015.

the Romney experience indicates – though his campaign never seemed to recognize the point – the reverse is also true: sometimes candidates can pay a real price for failing to provide clear policy proposals. In many cases, Romney’s vagueness almost certainly reduced the appeal of his policies.

A good example of this problem was Romney’s proposal to reform the individual and corporate income taxes. For at least 2 years prior to the election, Barack Obama had been attacking Republicans for their defense of various tax loopholes: accelerated depreciation of corporate jets; tax write-offs for companies that shipped jobs overseas; the oil depletion allowance; and so forth. What Romney could have done (he actually took a tentative step in this direction during the first debate) was to have agreed with and accepted all of Obama’s suggestions. “Tax breaks for corporate jet owners? You’re right, I’ll eliminate them. Tax subsidies for sending jobs overseas? I’m not sure they really exist, but if they do, they’re gone, too. I will eliminate all of the loopholes the president has mentioned – except that I will use the ‘savings’ to lower the overall corporate tax rate, not as a way of raising taxes.”

As Ronald Reagan understood when he pursued a similar type of tax reform in 1985–86, this kind of policy has substantial “populist” appeal. It allows Republicans to oppose special privileges for the wealthy and powerful without compromising any of their principles. By failing to get specific, Romney considerably reduced the appeal of one of his major policy proposals and instead saddled himself with the image of appearing to defend tax breaks for wealthy special interests.

In addition, the Republican lack of specificity allowed the Obama campaign to make its own assumptions about how to fill in the blanks: about the kinds of changes in the tax code that Romney would and would not make. This was what lay behind the widely-publicized projection by the Tax Policy Center that the Romney tax plan would raise taxes by \$2000 on the middle class. What the Tax Policy Center did, in effect, was to assume the worst as to how Romney would resolve his plan’s many ambiguities and then calculate who would be hurt. Romney could have largely short-circuited these criticisms if he had been willing to provide a few more details about his plan. But, of course, he chose not to do that.

Policy specificity, in short, has both disadvantages and advantages. A candidate who fails to tell the voters about his post-election plans may thereby shield himself from certain kinds of attacks – but he may also forgo the opportunity to show the voters the most appealing features of his policies. For a candidate in Romney’s position, there were additional reasons to be as specific and

detailed as possible. For at least 7 years – ever since he had made his national political ambitions clear in 2005 – Romney had been fighting the perception that there was no there there: that he was a politician with no firm convictions, who would do and say anything to get elected.

Romney might have reduced this problem somewhat had he made a more artful transition from state governor to national candidate (as Bill Clinton, for example, had done in 1991). But given the reputation Romney was saddled with as of early 2012, the best counterattack would have been to present a very specific, detailed set of policy proposals: to say to the voters, in effect, “Want to know what I stand for? Here’s exactly what I will do when I take office.” Instead, Romney’s unwillingness to spell out in more detail what he intended to do almost certainly accentuated some of the worst aspects of his public image.

The Republican Convention: A Wasted Opportunity

As a case study in the Romney’s campaign aversion to a serious discussion of the issues, one cannot do better than examine the Republican national convention. Though conventions no longer exercise any important decision-making powers, they are, as both political strategists and political scientists have come to appreciate, an important opportunity to sell the party and its candidates to the potential electorate. For four solid nights (now three), each party is given an hour of free, prime-time airtime, in which carefully selected party spokespersons have the chance to speak directly to the voters, without a great deal of media intervention.

The most direct and measurable consequence of this three-day-long infomercial is a phenomenon known as the “post-convention bounce.” Immediately after a party’s national convention, its presidential candidate usually experiences an increase in his national poll standings. In 2012, however, Romney became only the second presidential candidate in the last 40 years to receive no bounce from his own convention. What becomes clear when one examines the prime-time speeches at the Republican convention is that the Romney campaign did not get a bounce because they did not deserve one. With very few exceptions, most of the major prime-time speeches were chock full of touching life stories and vague, uplifting rhetoric, and conspicuously short on serious policy discussion.

A good example of how the Republicans used their 3 precious days of national airtime is provided by the keynote address delivered by New Jersey Governor Chris

Christie. As was widely observed at the time, Christie did a good job of telling viewers about the life history of Chris Christie and his record as governor. He was noticeably less good at saying anything that might have persuaded an undecided or weakly-committed Obama voter to support Mitt Romney. Not surprisingly, in light of what I have said earlier, Christie had few specific things to say about what Romney would do if he were elected president. (It was surely not Christie's responsibility to deliver what the Romney campaign had failed to provide.)

More notable was Christie's striking failure to provide a detailed critique of the Obama record. Here, for example, is *everything* Christie said about the highly controversial Democratic health-care legislation:

Mitt Romney will tell us the hard truths we need to hear to end the debacle of putting the world's greatest health care system in the hands of federal bureaucrats and putting those bureaucrats between an American citizen and her doctor.

Earlier in this article, I have reviewed the Obama Administration's well-below-average performance in managing the American economy. Christie's *complete* comments on that record read as follows:

For make no mistake, the problems are too big to let the American people lose – the slowest recovery in decades, a spiraling out of control deficit, an education system that's failing to compete in the world. . . Mitt Romney will tell us the hard truths we need to hear to put us back on the path to growth and create good paying private sector jobs again in America.

Governor Christie made no comments at all about energy or the "Fast and Furious" gun-running scandal, said nothing about poverty or how women and young people had fared during the Obama presidency, made only the very briefest references to national defense or foreign policy. Most of his speech was given over to highly general comments about the need for "real leaders" who would rise above politics and tell the "hard truths" to the American people.

Christie's aversion to serious issue discussion would have been less problematic if it had been an exception to the general rule. In fact, most of the other prime-time Republican speakers adhered to the same script. Florida Senator Marco Rubio, who spoke immediately before Romney, told the national television audience about his life story (i.e., Rubio's, not Romney's), talked a great deal about how "special" America was, and, much like Christie, failed to say anything very substantive about either what Obama had done wrong or what Romney would

do differently. Two nights earlier, Ann Romney had celebrated love and motherhood and told us that Mitt was a good man. She did not, however, say anything that might have been construed as a substantive response to the Democratic charge that Republicans were waging a "war on women."

Condoleezza Rice did spend part of her speech criticizing the Obama administration's record in foreign policy, though mostly at a rather high level of abstraction. But she did take time to assure the audience that she, too, had a compelling life story. One or two speeches of this kind might have been a reasonable part of the convention line-up. Add them all together, and one gets the distinct sense that the Romney campaign believed it could win the election just by convincing voters that Republicans were nice people.

What the Republican convention desperately needed, in short, was a speech like the one that Bill Clinton gave just 1 week later at the Democratic convention. I have never been a big fan of Bill Clinton's, yet his speech was undeniably a remarkable achievement. For unlike the speakers at the Republican convention, Clinton treated the electorate as if they were grown-ups, who would actually listen to a serious, detailed discussion of the issues. Much, maybe most, of what Clinton had to say was contestable or misleading or only a partial truth. But the proper answer to such criticisms was not to have one more Republican tell the story of their hard personal upbringing, but to have at least one speaker provide a detailed, Republican perspective on the issues. Quite remarkably – and quite tellingly – no one even tried, for that would have required a campaign that took issues seriously.

All of this substantially raised the bar for Romney's own acceptance speech, which was actually a rather pedestrian performance. After the usual introductory comments ("Nice to be here; I accept the nomination; and don't I have a wonderful running-mate"), Romney launched into a long and quite forgettable discussion of the "American experience." He then suggested, in remarkably mild terms, that perhaps Obama had not been a very successful president. After talking about his life story (to be fair, the candidate's own speech is supposed to include such material), Romney finally got around to saying something about his own program. But his "five steps" to revive the economy were rattled off so quickly, and provided so few specifics, that I would be surprised if he impressed anyone who had not already planned to vote for him. A few more jabs at Obama, and the convention was over.

The Fall Campaign

Having received no bounce from its own convention and having no real opportunity to respond to the considerably more issue-oriented Democratic convention, the Romney campaign had, by late September, dug itself a large hole. According to the Real Clear Politics average of national polls (which, if anything, underestimated the Obama vote),⁶ Obama had a 3%–4%-point lead over Romney that began immediately after the Democratic convention and showed no signs of diminishing. Panic was beginning to grow in Republican and conservative ranks.

A small army of conservative commentators, including Charles Krauthammer, Rich Lowry, Mona Charen, Peggy Noonan, and Jay Cost, wrote articles or columns during this period in which they lamented how poorly the Romney campaign was being run. Yet the Romney high command gave little indication that they took these criticisms seriously, much less that they intended to alter their strategy or leadership.

That Romney got back into the race was due entirely to his performance in the first presidential debate. That debate gave voters a tantalizing glimpse of what the Romney campaign could have been. For 2 hours, Romney did deliver a thorough, substantive critique of the Obama record and (to a lesser extent) showed voters that he had at least some specific programs and policies of his own. Unfortunately for Republicans, there was little follow-up to this break-through. The next two debates were largely a toss-up. According to post-debate surveys, Ryan was a narrow winner in the vice-presidential face-off, while Obama had a slight edge in the second presidential debate.

The final presidential debate, held on October 22, was another huge missed opportunity for the Romney campaign. On the eve of the debate, again according to realclearpolitics.com, the race was essentially dead even. On October 21, Obama had a 0.2%-point lead. Yet from Romney's behavior in the debate, one might have imagined that he was sitting on a 15-point lead, utterly confident of victory if only he did not commit a major gaffe. On issue after issue, Romney passed up the chance to challenge or attack Obama's record, as if his whole strategy for the debate could be summed up in the old adage, "Don't rock the boat."

The most astonishing example of this reticence came at the very beginning of the debate, when moderator Bob Schieffer asked Romney a question that positively begged

the Republican candidate to talk about recent events in Libya:

The first question, and it concerns Libya, the controversy over what happened there continues. Four Americans are dead, including an American ambassador. Questions remain. What happened? What caused it? Was it spontaneous? Was it an intelligence failure? Was there an attempt to mislead people about what really happened?

At the time of the third debate, the attack on the US embassy in Libya was an issue that, from the Republican perspective, was just waiting to be exploited. It raised major and serious questions about a host of issues: the administration's failure to protect American personnel abroad, Obama's claim that he had al-Qaida on the run, the administration's attempts to cover-up its mistakes.

Yet Romney refused to bite. All he would say about Libya was, "We see in Libya an attack apparently by – well, I think we know now by terrorists of some kind against – against our people there, four people dead. Our hearts and minds go to them." The rest of his answer argued for the need to put in place "a very comprehensive and robust strategy" to deal with the Middle East. But Romney's description of that strategy – "economic development," "better education," "gender equality," and "the rule of law" – ducked all of the most difficult policy choices and was not obviously different from what the Obama administration might have said it was doing.

And so it went for most of the evening. Romney did challenge Obama on a few small points: the fact that he did not visit Israel on his first trip to the Middle East, his comment to the Russian president that he would have "more flexibility" after the election. But Romney declined to criticize the Obama administration's handling of the conflict in Syria, or its response to the "Arab spring," or its decision to set a firm date for the withdrawal of American forces from Afghanistan.

In the final week of the campaign, Obama enjoyed a small increase in most polls, probably in reaction to his handling of Hurricane Sandy. A plausible case can be made that had Sandy not occurred – or had New Jersey Governor Christie not dramatically over-praised the federal government's response to that disaster – that Romney might still have eked out a narrow victory. But the election never should have been that close in the first place.

Anatomy of a Failure

And so it was that Mitt Romney, whose career in electoral politics had always drawn heavily on his purported

⁶ The final RCP average had Obama beating Romney by 0.8%. His actual margin of victory was slightly less than 3%.

managerial prowess, lost the presidency because of a greatly mismanaged campaign. Why did the Romney campaign perform so poorly? The problem starts, not surprisingly, with Romney himself. Having lived in Massachusetts for the last 30 years and thus having had an opportunity to watch Romney up close – indeed, having worked in one of his campaigns⁷ – I have reached three conclusions.

First, his father's career notwithstanding, Romney is not a naturally skilled politician. I have talked to a number of people over the years who have worked in business with Romney. All say he has superb business instincts. But he does not have good political instincts. Would someone with well-developed political skills really have chosen 2012 as a good year in which to build a new, multimillion-dollar home in La Jolla, complete with its own car elevator? Would someone with good political antennae have said – even to a group of campaign contributors – that 47% of the population would not vote for him under any circumstances?

Second, though Romney does have some core convictions about issues and ideology, that is not what drives or motivates him in politics. He is, rather, what Barack Obama claimed to be in 2008: a non-ideological pragmatist. Like many other people who got into politics after considerable success in some other field, Romney has enormous confidence in his own ability to solve problems and make an otherwise balky system work. Unfortunately, that perspective often leads him to underestimate the importance of issues, at least in the context of campaigns.

Finally, Romney's poor political instincts extend to his campaigns, where he has a track record of hiring the wrong people to manage his campaigns – which goes some way toward explaining why he has run for office four times and only won once. When he ran for the Senate in 1994, for example, Romney hired a local political consultant named Charlie Manning, who was good at schmoozing with reporters but was plainly out of his league in managing a high-profile, media-intensive race like the one against Edward Kennedy. Though polls taken immediately after the September primaries showed the race tied, and 1994 was the best Republican year in four decades, Kennedy beat Romney by 17% points.

As the chief strategist for his 2012 campaign, Romney somehow chose Stuart Stevens, a controversial Republican consultant whose faults and deficiencies reinforced Romney's own. In particular, Stevens was, by numerous accounts, embarrassed by many mainstream Republican policy positions and therefore inclined to minimize issues

and issue-based appeals. To make matters worse, many other top positions in the Romney campaign were filled by people who had worked with Romney in Massachusetts but were untested on the national stage.

The weakness of the Romney campaign team was visible long before the Republican convention. Romney did of course win his party's nomination, which seems to have boosted his campaign team's already sky-high level of confidence in their own abilities. But the Republican nominating contest should have suggested the opposite conclusion: Romney's triumph had much less to do with the juggernaut-like efficiency of his own campaign than the remarkable weakness of his opponents. One telling indication of the disparity was the ability of rival campaigns to raise money. During the first 3 months of 2012, when most of the key primaries and caucuses were held and Romney was gradually establishing a large lead in the delegate count, Rick Santorum and Newt Gingrich, Romney's two main rivals for the nomination, spent \$18 million and \$21 million on their campaigns, respectively. Romney spent \$77 million.

On numerous occasions during the nominating race, the Romney team showed that it was not yet ready for prime time. A good example was the way the campaign chose to deal with the question of whether and when to make public Romney's tax returns. Apparently believing that the best way to minimize the controversy was to keep them secret for as long as possible, Romney initially said that he would not release his returns until April of 2012. In fact, that decision had just the opposite effect to that intended, as Romney's rivals made it a major talking point in the lead-up to the South Carolina primary.

This tactical decision also seems to have been quite unpopular with voters. (In one televised debate, the audience actually booed Romney when he tried to explain his reasoning.) After Gingrich won a resounding victory in South Carolina, Romney abruptly changed his mind and released some of his returns – which, of course, received a great deal more publicity than they would have if the campaign had quietly made them public 6 months earlier. In retrospect, it is hard to imagine that the campaign could have handled this matter any more ineptly than it did.

Similarly, in November of 2011, the Romney campaign's first ad attacking Barack Obama deliberately quoted the president out of context. (The claim that he had been “quoted out of context” would later become the Obama campaign's stock response every time they said something embarrassing, but in this instance the claim was clearly accurate.) An unnamed Romney advisor tried to justify the ad by claiming that it showed that the Romney campaign knew “how these guys [the Obama

⁷ In 1994, I helped do issues research (on an unpaid basis) for Romney's Senate campaign.

campaign] operate” and knew “how to get under their skin” [as quoted in York (2011)].

Actually, what the ad really showed was an appalling lack of judgment. One of the most precious assets any campaign has is its credibility, yet the Romney campaign deliberately sacrificed some of theirs just to annoy the opposing campaign. This is the sort of thing one would expect from a college fraternity doing battle with another fraternity, not from a serious presidential campaign.

Unfortunately for the Republican Party, there is no evidence that the Romney campaign learned from their mistakes or sought to bring wiser, more experienced hands on board for the general election. People who work in the White House, it is often alleged, operate as if they live inside a “bubble,” largely insulated from the ways that most Americans live and think. The Romney high command, however, seems to have created a bubble

before even winning the election. Throughout the fall, every time they faced a setback or encountered a new round of criticism, their typical response was to send out a reassuring email, explaining that nothing was wrong and the campaign was going along just fine.

In the aftermath of Obama’s victory, commentators were quick to offer advice to the losing side. Republicans, we were told, needed to (pick one or more): compromise on the immigration issue to win more Latino votes; move left on social issues to win the votes of young people; try to find a version of conservatism that seemed more compassionate and less threatening. Well, maybe – but if Romney had only run a more competent campaign, those same pundits might now be giving advice to the Democrats.

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